PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION ON THE

EDWIN M. COLVIN HOUSE

5940 NORTH SHERIDAN ROAD, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

ORIGINALLY SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS
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THE EDWIN M. COLVIN HOUSE
5940 North Sheridan Road
Chicago, Illinois

Constructed: 1909

Architect: George W. Maher

The two decades between 1890 and 1914 saw worldwide an extraordinary burgeoning of new ideas and techniques in residential architecture and design, many of which still influence our attitudes and shape our taste today. Simultaneously, the American Prairie and Craftsman schools, the English Arts and Crafts movement, the Austrian Secession, the Scottish Glasgow school, and similar movements in Scandinavia and the Netherlands were blazing a trail away from Victorian historicism to a new honesty and fitness of purpose which embraced novel styles, forms and materials. Of the Americans, one of the most inventive and prolific was the Chicago architect George W. Maher. Maher's life-long dream was to create a truly indigenous American architecture. Architectural historian H. Allen Brooks writes:

> Maher . . . cannot be dismissed lightly. His influence on the Midwest was profound and prolonged and, in its time, was certainly as great as was Wright's. Compared with the conventional architecture of the day, his work showed considerable freedom and originality, and his interiors were noted for their open and flowing, if not sophisticated space. His designs, like Mies van der Rohe's in more recent years, were easily emulated; they also embodied the ideals cherished by the client.

The Edwin M. Colvin House at 5940 North Sheridan Road, designed by Maher in 1909, is an excellent example of his mature residential style. One of the very few remaining of the Sheridan Road mansions within the Chicago city limits, it stands out in what is now a canyon of high-rise apartment buildings along the lakeshore. It was identified by the Chicago Historic Resources Survey in its documentation of the 48th Ward as being of particular merit. Historically, it provides a good illustration of the type of client who would commission a George Maher house. Its location in the community area of Edgewater on Chicago's Far North Side reflects the growth of the city at that time.

History of the Edgewater Community

Starting at Foster Avenue and terminating at Devon Avenue, Edgewater is bounded on the west by Ravenswood Avenue and on the east by Sheridan Road. One of its first notable homesteads was a tavern and inn, called the Seven Mile House because of its distance from the Chicago City Hall. This local meeting place was constructed in 1848 by a Luxembourger named Nicholas Krantz. Once known as the "celery-growing capital of the Midwest," Edgewater remained largely rural until the latter years of the nineteenth century. Instrumental in changing Edgewater into a residential community was John Lewis Cochran, who in the 1880s and 1890s in collaboration with a number of successful Philadelphia investors, transformed 350 acres of dense woods and underbrush into a model suburban subdivision complete with wide macadam streets, stone sidewalks, and a complete drainage system. Advertisements in the late 1880s promoted Edgewater as "the only electric lighted suburb adjacent to Chicago." In 1889, the City of Lake View, including Edgewater, was annexed to the City of Chicago.

After the turn of the century, as transportation lines were extended from the central city, Edgewater experienced rapid growth with the preponderence of the population being of Swedish, German, and Irish descent. It was during the years from 1900 to 1920 that North Sheridan Road developed as a preserve of large single-family mansions, and Edgewater was viewed as one of the pre-eminent residential neighborhoods in the city. Attesting to the affluence of the area was the Edgewater Beach Hotel (now demolished), designed by Benjamin Marshall and built in 1916 at 5349 North Sheridan Road.

The first two decades of the twentieth century also saw Chicago consolidate the strength of its industrial base. Chicago's leadership in agricultural machinery, meatpacking, and food processing continued while other industries flourished as well. As Mayer and Wade note in *Chicago, Growth of A Metropolis*, "The men's clothing industry, which had accounted for eight per cent of the country's output in 1879, produced eighteen percent by 1914. At the turn of the century, printing and publishing establishments employed over 20,000 people, and Chicago was second only to New York in both areas."

These statistics are significant in light of the fact that the first two owners of the house at 5940 North Sheridan Road were both leaders in the above noted businesses. Title records indicate that the house was originally built for Harry M. Stevenson, president of the H.M. Stevenson Company, tailors. However, after only two years the property was sold to Edwin M. Colvin who is listed in the 1916 *Who's Who in Chicago* as the owner and vice president of the W.F. Hall Printing Company. Born and educated in Buchanan, Michigan, Colvin's entire career was in an executive capacity for a variety of printing firms. The father of four children, he was a member of the Art Institute and the Chicago Athletic Association. He was a Republican, belonged to the Methodist church, and enjoyed fishing and golf as recreational activities. This brief profile indicates Colvin was the typical well-to-do businessman who elected to live in the fashionable, prestigious Edgewater community.

The Architect George W. Maher and His Times

George Washington Maher was born on Christmas Day, 1864, in Mill Creek, West Virginia. His family later moved to New Albany, Indiana, where he was educated in the public schools. At the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed as a draftsman in the Chicago architectural office of Augustus Bauer and Henry Hill. Later Maher entered the office of Joseph Lyman Silsbee where he obtained the bulk of his significant architectural training. Silsbee's office was an early employer and teacher of several Prairie school architects, and it was in this office that Maher came into contact with such talented young architects as Frank Lloyd Wright and George Grant Elmslie. After a brief association with Cecil Corwin, Maher established an independent practice in 1893. That same year, other important events occurred in Maher's life. A severe nervous disorder, which would continue to plague him throughout his life, necessitated a period of recuperation abroad but had the additional benefit of broadening Maher's architectural education. In 1893, Maher married Elizabeth Brooks, daughter of Alden Brooks, a local Chicago portraitist. For his new bride, Maher built a residence on Warwick Avenue in Kenilworth, Illinois, which was to be their home for the remainder of their lives. In 1894, their only child, Philip Brooks Maher, was born. Later Philip would join his father's firm and, indeed, went on to establish his own noteworthy practice in Chicago. The Maher family was continually active in the social and municipal affairs of Kenilworth with Maher serving as both a trustee of the village and a park commissioner. He belonged to the Union League Club, the Chicago Athletic Association, and the American Institute of Architects, serving as president of the Illinois Chapter in 1918. Maher had also been one of the founding members of the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society, begun in 1895, and he was a leading figure in the Chicago Architectural Club, which was the representative organization of the Prairie movement. Unfortunately, during the 1920s Maher's physical and mental health rapidly deteriorated and regrettably, he took his own life on September 12, 1926, at his summer home in Douglas, Michigan.

Throughout his career the majority of Maher's work was residential. As a result of his social contacts and club memberships, he received numerous commissions from important figures in Chicago's prosperous business community for substantial residences in the suburbs along Chicago's North Shore. Another major concentration of Maher houses is in Oak Park, Illinois, and within Chicago along Hutchinson Street (designated a Chicago Landmark in 1977). Of his non-residential work, two important examples are Northwestern University's Patten Gymnasium (now demolished) and the Swift Hall of Engineering, both constructed 1908-9. Maher was also commissioned by Northwestern to prepare a comprehensive campus plan which, while never executed, has been lauded for taking advantage of the natural association of building, landscape, and shoreline. Architectural historian Carl Condit noted that this plan made Maher "the first architect to design in a native and modern style for an American University." A bank building and an administration building for the J.R. Watkins Medical Company, both in Winona, Minnesota, are further examples of Maher's commercial designs. Community planning was also a paramount concern of Maher, and he was active in projects in Glencoe, Kenilworth, and Hinsdale, Illinois, all three relating to the downtown and railroad station areas of these villages.

Although most architectural historians classify George W. Maher as a Prairie school architect, his work as a whole does not fall strictly within that stylistic framework. Prairie school elements are certainly discernible in his work, but other influences are strongly evident as well, and the best of his work is the synthesis of all these into a highly personal style. Early in his career, Maher had very well thought out views on architecture which he elaborated in 1887 in a paper titled "Originality in American Architecture." In it Maher expresses admiration for H.H. Richardson who he thought had achieved the idea "of massiveness, imposing centralization, of grouping novel ideas for comfort in the interior arrangement [of residences]." Maher also was impressed with Colonial Revival architecture which he said:

> . . . tends to leave the impression of quietness of home rather than a dazed impression of grandeur. This is the right idea of a residence, to have it speak of its function. No building has genuine style which does not speak of the thought which first brought it into existence. Thus the true path toward an original style is to follow the dictation of necessity and then to improve upon detail.

Throughout his career, Maher's residential designs frequently suggested the character of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1893 design for the Winslow House in River Forest, Illinois. Its bold rectilinear massing and hipped roof with broad eaves marked the beginnings of the Prairie school movement led by Wright at the turn of the century. Maher's contact with Wright's early designs undoubtably came firsthand as he shared an office in the early 1890s with architect Cecil Corwin, under whose name Wright surreptitiously listed many of his early independent commissions while working under contract for Adler & Sullivan. While Wright later abandoned the rectilinear character of the Winslow House design in favor of his more familiar horizontal ground-hugging designs, Maher frequently elaborated on the basic form of the Winslow House for his own residential commissions. Maher's residential designs up until about 1910 often reflected the broad horizontal character of the Winslow House, with strongly rectilinear massing, broken by a symmetrical placement of rectangular or square openings centered on a prominently expressed central entry. Site planning was also an integral part of Maher's designs, with ornamental terraces emphasizing the entrance and the relation of the house itself to its site. An important early example of Maher's work in this style was the John Farson House, erected in 1897 at Oak Park, Illinois, which shared a close affinity with the principles behind the Winslow House design, but exhibited a fresh originality unique to Maher's work. While Maher often experimented with other forms in his search for an indigenous American residential architectural style, the Winslow-inspried designs remained a recurring characteristic of his architectural output.

Early in his career Maher also developed what he described as his "motif-rhythm theory." Although Maher was not alone in his single motif concept, he used it to a somewhat greater extent than any other architect of the period, and it became a unique and highly personal characteristic of his work. Architectural historian J. William Rudd explains: "His development of the 'motif-ryhthm theory' was achieved by choosing a plant indigenous to the area and/or a specific geometric shape as the unifying motif within which the various elements of the composition were to subordinately relate."

Notable examples of this include the 1902 James A. Patten house in Evanston, Illinois (now demolished) where thistle was used repeatedly as the singular decorative pattern and the 1908 E.J. Magerstadt house in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood where the poppy enhances one of Maher's most acclaimed commissions. As Maher himself explained, "ornament should be identified with some floral element of the locality to which it is confined, recognizing that the leading flower of a neighborhood is nature's symbol of the spirit breathed there."

The second distinctive period of Maher's career, which is generally dated from 1904 onwards, reveals the increasing influence of European designers of the period. According to architectural historian H. Allen Brooks, Maher "endeavored to combine the best that contemporary European architecture had to offer, hoping to produce something personal and substantially new." Two in particular were important to Maher, the Englishman C.F.A. Voysey (1857-1941) and the Austrian Joseph Maria Olbrich (1867-1908).

In the two decades around 1900, C.F.A. Voysey had come to be regarded as the central figure in English architecture and design. Voysey specialized in country houses and was successful as a designer of private houses of moderate size as was Maher. Architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner notes that "his plans are easy and at the same time his houses fit their setting, and their simple geometry was refreshing; they were eminently reasonable, unradical and unexacting."

It was not unusual to find an American Midwest architect such as George Maher subject to the influence of European designers. A variety of progressive architectural periodicals criss-crossed between Europe and America documenting the new visual concepts, and the designers themselves travelled and taught, wrote and exhibited. Maher had seen Voysey's work in the English magazine *Studio* which was published in America as the *International Studio.*

The ground-breaking achievements of British architects associated with the Arts and Crafts movement such as Voysey were widely acclaimed on the Continent, especially in the German-speaking countries. *Das Englische Haus*, a book by Hermann Muthesius, an architect attached to the German embassy in London between 1896 and 1903, was particularly important in promulgating the principles of the new domestic architecture at the turn of the century. The Austrian Joseph Maria Olbrich was a confirmed Anglophile, enjoying the patronage of Ernst Ludwig, Grand Duke of Hesse, who in 1899 founded an artists colony at Matildenhohe in Darmstadt aimed at introducing Arts and Crafts ideals to German design. Maher had an opportunity to view Olbrich's work firsthand in 1904 when he went to St. Louis to see the Louisiana Purchase Exposition where the German exhibition, including furniture designed by Olbrich, had received much attention from visiting American architects. Of lesser but lasting impact on Maher was the work of the English architectural firm of Parker and Unwin. Instrumental in the Garden City movement, Barry Parker (1867-1947) and Raymond Unwin (1863-1940) sought to combine in town planning the practicalities of the city with the rural amenities of ample sunlight and green space. The apogee of Maher's career was reached in the years between 1908 and 1910, and it was at this juncture that the Colvin House was designed and built.

The Colvin House

Located at the northwest corner of Thorndale Avenue and Sheridan Road, the Colvin House is the most distinguished survivor of the substantial residences which once lined the lakefront of Chicago's Far North Side. Faced in creamy yellow roman brick with grey Bedford limestone trimming, the basic form of the house is a massive rectangle, cleanly defined by broad planes of masonry. The low hipped tile roof and the long line of the overhanging wood trim of the cornice suggest the pronounced horizontality of the Prairie school, but the bold monolithic massing of the street fronts clearly reflects Maher's personal interpretation of indigenous American residential design. As was characteristic of Maher's work the site planning of the house was closely tied to the composition of the house itself, with its street fronts set back from the sidewalk, the entry unified and emphasized by successive low formal terraces incorporating a planting bed and a pair of broad circular planters. The central projecting arched entry portal is the visual focus of the composition, emphasizing the interplay of the recessed vertical elements immediately above the entry with the bold horizontal symmetry of the composition as a whole. The use of evenly colored, smooth face brick as the principal facade material created a homogeneous wall texture which was precisely broken by rectilinear window openings defined by lightly profiled limestone frames. The central window of the second floor is deeply recessed behind two carved, free-standing limestone columns. The treatment of the wood dormer also reflects an interplay between vertical and recessed elements, appearing to penetrate the intersecting eaves of the roof. Above the second story windows, the double projecting cornice is wood, with concealed internal rain gutters. The roofing is flat clay tile which remains in good condition but blackened by the weather.

In marked contrast to the formal symmetry of the street elevations, the rear of the Colvin House is varied in its configuration, due to the individual requirements of the rooms within. At the extreme northern end of the house, a one-story three-car garage wing extends west from the main body of the house, conected by an arched open-air service entry. The garage wing was treated similarly to the main house, with the same yellow-buff roman brick as the principal cladding material, and carved wood columns similar to the second floor stone columns on the front elevation. Although the rear of the house contains the garage and service entry, it also serves a formal function as well. Paved with brick laid in a herringbone pattern, the rear serves as a formal entry to the house for visitors, incorporating a *porte-cochere* covered by a sweeping semi-circular extension of the first-floor roofline. An open air sunporch at the southwest corner of the building also looks onto the rear terrace and was connected directly to the formal drawing room by three pairs of French doors. A prominent feature of the rear elevation is a central, semi-circular arched window at the second story, marking the location of the main staircase within.

Ornament is used sparingly on the house, the aesthetic qualities of the design relying more on the boldly articulated massing. Nevertheless, the decorative treatment of the second-floor and coach house capitals illustrates Maher's concerns for indigenous flora in his motif-rhythm decorative theory. Tulips rather than acanthus leaves or similarly classical plant forms adorn the capitals, suggesting the decorative motif of the interior. Maher's predilection for classical ornament is also seen in the stylized fret-sawn dart molding at the cornice.

Although George Maher was assimilating many of the hallmarks of the European avant-garde into his work by 1909, the Colvin House is reminiscent of one of Maher's earliest, largest, and most successful designs, the 1897 Farson House. Here Maher brought together many of the significant features which he considered of paramount importance in residential design: the massiveness, centralization, and substantiality which he felt Richardson had best achieved; the symmetry and formality of Colonial Revival architecture which so impressed him; and the breadth and horizontality of the Prairie school which he recognized Frank Lloyd Wright had achieved in the 1893 Winslow House and which was especially fitting for the Midwest environment.

This synthesis constitutes Maher's unique contribution to American architecture. Throughout his career Maher continued to explore and refine these qualities, all of which are apparent in the Edwin M. Colvin House.

OPPOSITE:

One of the last surviving mansions along Sheridan Road, the Colvin House stands out in what is now a canyon of high-rise apartment buildings along the lakeshore.

(Bob Thall, photographer)

OPPOSITE:

As was characteristic of Maher's work, the site planning of the house is closely tied to the composition of the house itself. The low hipped roof, the long line of the cornice, and the broad planes of the masonry are emphasized by the successive low formal terraces and wide urns.

(Bob Thall, photographer)

OPPOSITE:

On the Colvin House, the use of evenly colored, smooth face brick as the principal facade material creates a homogeneous wall texture which is precisely broken by rectilinear window openings defined by lightly profiled limestone frames. The central projecting arched entry portal is the visual focus of the composition.

(Bob Thall, photographer)

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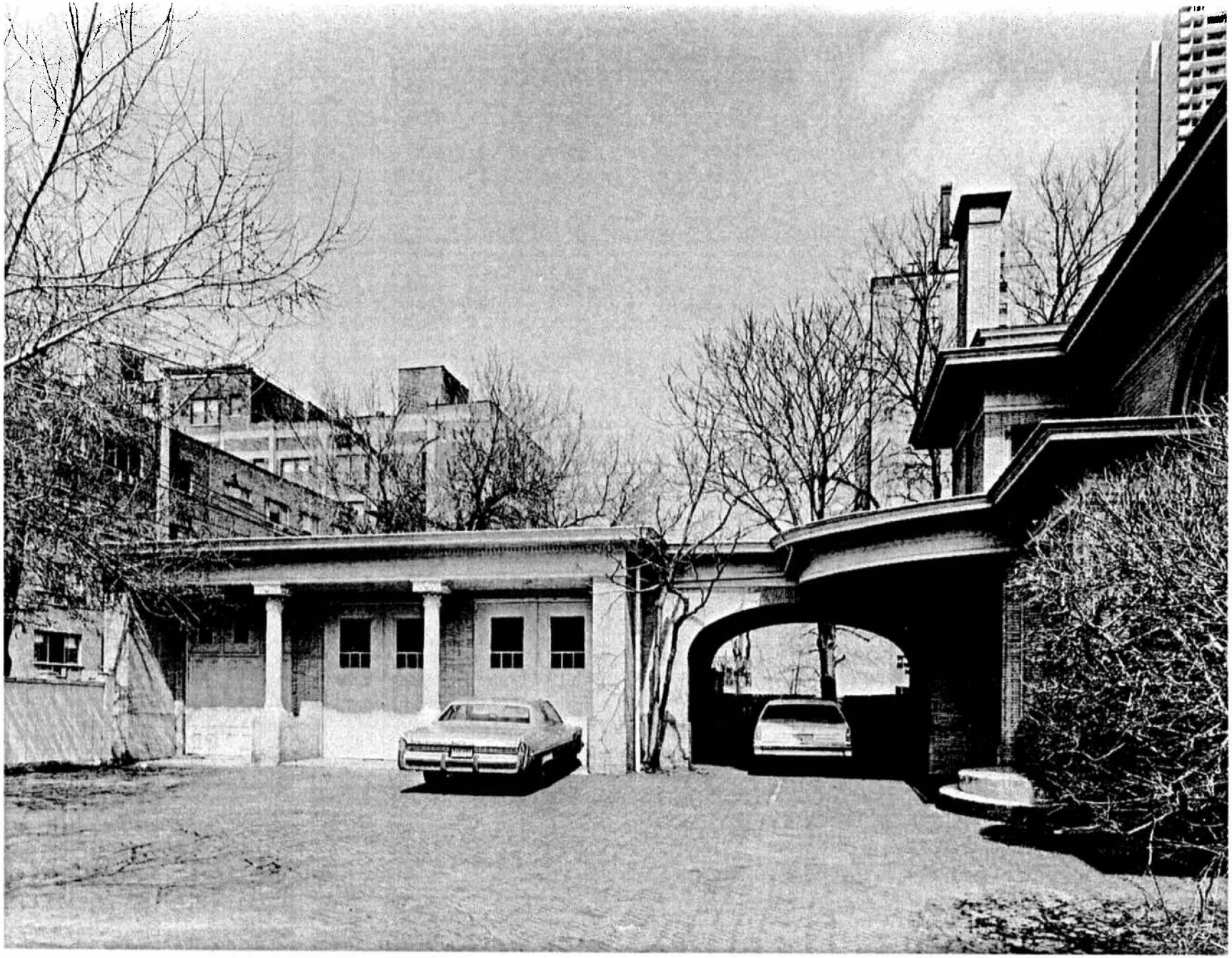
OPPOSITE:

In marked contrast to the formal symmetry of the street elevations, the rear of the Colvin House is varied in its configuration. The tulip, used on the column capitals of the garage, illustrates Maher's concern for indigenous flora in his motif-rhythm decorative theory. Maher's predilection for classical ornamental elements is also seen in the stylized fret-sawn dart molding at the cornice.

(Bob Thall, photographer)



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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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